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ABSTRACT

Psychology as a profession and the American educational system are in a major period of transition. Transitions influencing the American education system are: (1) an increasingly diverse multicultural society; (2) rapid changes in the work place; (3) changes in American society; (4) civil rights legislation; and (5) rising costs associated education. Transitions influencing the American psychological system are: (1) expanding school psychologists roles and required skills demand enhanced levels of training; (2) psychologists in private and agency practices have come to recognize the need for involvement with schools in work with children and families; and (3) recent development of managed health care systems in combination with the rapid rise of other mental health professionals has created a competitive market place. Five themes that represent directions for change designed to enhance the perception of psychology in the schools are: (1) service for all teachers, students, and parents; (2) individual problem-solving versus categorical classification; (3) restructuring special education; (4) involving parents; and (5) evaluation of services and outcomes. If the guiding principle of psychology's improvement in the schools is the support and enhancement of the education system, then the inevitable outcome will be that psychology will be seen as an indispensable partner. (JBJ)

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Chapter Seven

Five Themes to Enhance the Value of Psychology to Schools

Richard R. Abidin

I believe that psychology as a profession and the American educational system are both in a period of major transition. These transitions create opportunities for constructive change, but also require a reexamination of the ways services are performed. The driving forces behind these charges are many, involving complex interactions which are not fully understood. Nevertheless, psychology as a profession must be aware of these factors and be responsive to them if it is to make a significant and enduring contribution to schools.

I will first briefly highlight some of the contemporary contextual factors that are influencing the American educational *system*, and the profession of psychology. The educational system shall be defined as children and their families, educational personnel, representatives of the larger society, and the laws and policies which regulate education. The components of the psychology profession shall be defined as all of the psychology personnel who work in and/or with the educational system, and those indirect contributors such as university trainers of psychologists for both practice and research roles. Consideration of these contexts will help in understanding the perceptions and motivation of the stakeholders, their goals and their desired outcomes. Second, I will describe what I believe to be some of the historical patterns of psychology's involvement in schools which represent strengths, weaknesses, and barriers to change. Third, in direct response to the invitation to participate in this book, I will present my "best thinking on how psychologists can work to make psychology in schools indispensable. . . ."

Before proceeding with this presentation, I would like to reflect on the title of this volume, "Making Psychologists in Schools Indispensable: Critical Issues and Emerging Perspectives." What does this title mean and to whom? I am sure that as a profession, psychology will present a number of issues and perspectives on why what it has to offer is indispensable. I am also sure that these assertions will come largely out of good and noble motives and beliefs. However, over the years, what psychologists espoused as *good* for children and schools was not always seen by other stakeholders of the educational system in the same light. One example that clearly makes the point is that in the past a major *indispensable* role of psychology was the sorting of students into special education classes based on IQ measures, a role which some stakeholders believe should be dispensed with since it did not result in documented enhanced learning and apparently discriminated against certain groups of citizens. To become indispensable requires the delivery of services which are relevant to the central missions and values of

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the educational system. The perception of being indispensable by the stakeholders will develop only when psychology is sensitive and responsive to the issues of relevance, effectiveness, and cost, as they are understood by the stakeholders.

The State of Contemporary Education

At present the educational system in the United States is under a variety of pressures to change and meet the complex needs of society. Historically, schools were the melting pots of society with the expectation that they help create a homogenized society of workers. Children were the raw material to be molded into the new members of society. Parents had little individualized power and opportunity to affect the system. Today the educational system faces an increasingly diverse multicultural society, with students and parents who possess increased rights and opportunities to impact the educational system. Parents and students are increasingly empowered stakeholders who will be definers of what is indispensable.

The current rapid changes in the work place require that workers possess knowledge and skills relevant to an evolving technological society. The values of a strong back, willing hands, and a consistent commitment of time are no longer the primary attributes of an employable person. In a global economy, other nations are able to produce goods which draw upon minimal educational skills. Industry in the United States recognizes that if our economy is to remain sound and competitive, we must have an educational system that develops a high-quality workforce. Industry is thus increasingly concerned about the features of the educational system that enhance the skills of the workforce, and the social and emotional functioning of individuals that determine work performance.

Schools in recent years have been impacted by a number of changes in American society, many of which provide opportunities for psychology to contribute to schools. The rise of single-parent families, the increase in youth and family violence, widespread substance abuse problems, health issues such as the spread of contagious diseases and early pregnancy are only some of the factors associated with stresses in the educational system. Legislation supporting the civil rights of all members of society has required that the educational system make accommodations that often stress both the skills and resources of schools. These changes are most dramatically seen in the area of special education, but extend to a variety of other areas such as gender rights and children's civil rights in relation to school attendance. The actions of American society in the past 40 years to ensure the civil rights of all its citizens, and to create equality of opportunity translates into the need for services that support those values and the efforts of the educational system to be responsive to society's expectations. The educational concepts of mainstreaming, least restrictive environment, and total inclusion involve values which will be used in evaluating what service is indispensable.

The rising costs associated with the operation of the educational system, particularly special education, which is the portion with which psychology has been most extensively identified, requires that consideration of cost be a component of the final judgment of what services are indispensable. Even a service which is 90% effective in serving 2% of the population, but which consumes 35% of the budget probably would not be viewed by the educational system as indispensable. Indispensable educational services need to involve reasonable costs and evidence of linkage to positive outcomes.

The State of Contemporary Psychology

Psychology as profession, relative to schools, recently has rediscovered the educational system. This rediscovery doesn't mean that psychologists have not continued to be involved, with schools

during the past 50 years, but merely that there is a re-awakening of broad interest in schools. The American Psychological Association's creation of the Education and Practice Directorates, and the establishment of the Committee for the Advancement of Professional Practice (CAPP) and the APA Center for Psychology in Schools and Education (APA) certainly facilitated this development.

Psychologists in professional practice in school systems have found that the range of roles they are expected to fill and the required skills demand enhanced levels of training. School psychologists' training at both the predoctoral and doctoral levels has in recent years become more extensive, as is reflected in changes in certification and licensure standards. Psychology trainers need to continue to be sensitive to the skills required to fulfill future *indispensable roles*. They need to prepare psychologists for roles that involve new models of functioning in schools. The retraining of current personnel is both a major opportunity and a challenge for academic psychology.

In recent years, psychologists in private practice and agencies have come to recognize the need for involvement with schools as they work with children and families. It is increasingly clear that parents and schools expect psychologists who work external to the schools to be relevant and effective in their school-related efforts. For example, to work with children with ADHD and its co-morbid disorders almost uniformly requires involvement with the educational system.

In recent years, psychology as a profession has seen a rapid and dramatic rise in the number of psychologists prepared and licensed for professional practice. The primary driving force behind this increase initially was the development of the nationwide community mental health center system which was based on the rise in concern about the civil rights and social and emotional needs of citizens. This development was followed by the recognition of psychologists as mental health service providers by third-party payers, which translated into a huge influx of students into the profession who anticipated making a good living by practicing a socially useful profession. One side effect of these developments is that psychologists were trained and largely functioned using a medically-oriented model of individual diagnosis and treatment. While described in the school psychology literature, social systems interventions are used infrequently as the basis of the practice of psychology in schools.

The recent development of managed health care systems which have targeted mental health for cost and service reductions, when combined with the rapid rise in the number of other personnel in *mental health professions*, has created a competitive marketplace for psychologists. These conditions have stimulated psychologists to consider other marketplaces, and expanding their services to schools is a logical extension of practice. Unfortunately these psychologists carry with them the limitations inherent in a medically-oriented office-bound practice.

Historical Issues in Psychologists' Involvement in Schools

Psychologists' involvement with and in schools has a long tradition which relates to the roles of the identification of children with special education needs and individual case problem-solving. The work of Lightner Witmer, Alfred Binet, and H. H. Goddard foreshadowed psychology's contemporary involvement in those roles. During the past 50 years, schools have been largely the practice domain of *school psychologists*. These individuals were trained in a variety of diverse programs with different emphases, and at different levels of formal instruction ranging from one-year master's programs, to master's plus/specialist level, to doctoral psychologists. For the most part, school psychology has been and currently is practiced at the predoctoral level. As a result, what

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psychologists currently do in and for schools has been defined by the skills and competencies of those psychologists. The performance of psychometric assessments represents the primary activity of most *school psychologists.*

The major factor that has defined the role and function of school psychologists has been the development of special education and its related legislation and regulations. The role of psychologists, in this system, initially was to identify and certify those students who needed and were entitled to a special education. In recent years that role has expanded to include more of an intervention planning and supportive consultation function to teachers and the special education team. The enactment of special education legislation has been a double-edged sword for school psychology. The legislation made available funds for the support of psychology positions in the educational system which increased employment opportunities and brought more school psychologists into the educational system. These funds also enabled some school systems to employ psychologists with advanced training to provide a wider range of services. The downside was that school psychology was largely defined at the minimal level of training, and often school psychologists' scope of practice was limited to the diagnostic and labeling function by state and local education agencies. This restriction continues to be widely imposed despite the expressed authority in federal special education legislation for psychologists to provide *related services* including psychotherapy, counseling, and consultation to school personnel and parents.

The historical issues cited above need to be considered in developing an "indispensable psychology presence in the schools." It must be recognized that the current educational system has well-established perceptions of and expectations for psychology, as well as estimates of relevance, cost, and effectiveness based on this history. Psychology will need to develop approaches that address these perceptions in the current educational context if it is to be perceived as indispensable.

Making Psychology in Schools Indispensable

The search for more effective, relevant, and indispensable ways for psychology to contribute to education is not a new endeavor. The school psychology literature and the professional associations concerned with the practice of psychology in the schools have presented a number of themes over the past 50 years regarding needed reform. I will present five themes that represent directions for change designed to enhance the perception of psychology in schools:

1. Psychology should support the mental health and educational interests of all students and teachers;
2. Diagnostic assessment focused on categorical identification needs to be replaced by a systems-oriented problem solving approach;
3. Psychology needs to work toward the restructuring of special education to eliminate categorical classification to allow for problem-solving consultations to facilitate children's functioning in the least restrictive environment;
4. Psychology needs to incorporate parents into the problem-solving and facilitate their involvement in schools; and
5. The educational process and psychological interventions need to be evaluated.

The implementation of psychological resources based on these themes will facilitate the goals of the educational system and will positively impact the perceptions of the stakeholders regarding contributions of psychology.

Service for All Teachers, Students and Parents

Psychological services, at present, are perceived by school personnel and parents as primarily relevant to *problem children* and *those with disabilities*. In contrast, if psychology were practiced as a preventive or a developmental profession, it would become relevant to all parts of the educational system. Psychologists can play key roles in designing and implementing school-based prevention programs that address academic, mental health, and physical health problems. Preventive approaches need to be regularly incorporated into the practice of psychology in schools.

The use of pre-referral consultation to teachers and parents provides another opportunity for psychology to impact the educational system before more severe problems develop. How these services can enhance educational outcomes and minimize costs needs to be documented for the educational system.

Psychologists in schools have a major support role to play in relation to both parents and teachers which can be provided through consultation and education programs. These stakeholders are often under stress and frustrated by the performance and behavior of their children/students. Timely consultation with both, which facilitates mutual problem solving, creates the possibility that minor problems or normal developmental deviations will not become long term or severe problems.

School administrators often are confronted with behavioral and mental health issues with which they are uncomfortable working, and which they believe they lack the skills to handle. The availability of psychological consultation to help address mental health problems of school personnel, issues related to interactions with parents, morale and school community issues; as well as the management of children's behaviors, are but some areas in which a psychologist can and should provide support. Such support would directly impact the perception of school administrators regarding the value of psychology.

School boards are often composed of citizens who vary in their knowledge about educational systems and psychology in general, and the specific roles and functions of psychologists in a school. Psychology has a role to play in educating school boards regarding how the mental health problems of their communities impact the schools. Psychologists, for example, can help them design methods of evaluating the performance of various components of the educational program, provide them with examples of how integrated services can be provided to children and teachers, and help ensure that school board members understand psychologically related information such as the use of standardized test scores. The suggested expanded involvement of psychologists with all these stakeholders expands the base of those who would be informed about the value of psychological services, and in so doing increases their perception of what psychology has to offer.

Individual Problem-Solving Versus Categorical Classification

For the most part, at the present time, the overwhelming bulk of psychology's efforts in schools is centered around assessment designed to determine if a child is eligible for special education services, by virtue of his/her exhibiting behavior problems and/or ability and achievement deficits that fit a specific category. Theoretically, current assessment practices are open to combinations of factors other than the child's characteristics. In practice, however, school psychological services are primarily child-focused. Once a student is labeled, they are to receive services which are supposedly individualized. Unfortunately, what typically occurs is that the same interventions or teacher approaches are used regardless of the child's categorical label. Therefore, it is very likely that the longstanding problem of demonstrating the

effectiveness of special evaluation is linked to the lack of an individualized problem solving approach. The use of an individualized problem solving approach is not driven by meeting criteria for categories, but rather by trying to develop an overall understanding of what barriers exist to the student's performance. Issues such as the way the student is currently coping, the current instructional program used, and other classroom and distal (e.g., family, community) influences on the child are all part of understanding the child's performance. Consideration of each of these factors allows for the design of individualized intervention that addresses the various components of the system that are affecting the student's performance.

The use of individualized problem solving will enable the educational system to learn more about which types of intervention are effective and for what kinds of problems. The nature of the problem and not the *type* of student will become the focus. In addition to holding promise of being more effective, this approach is less stigmatizing and is a more respectful way of understanding the diversity of human performance. The more sharply focused the specification of problems and interventions are, the easier it is to see the linkage to outcome. The individualized problem solving approach creates the basis upon which the educational stakeholders can reasonably assess the relevance and effectiveness of psychological services. The National Association of School Psychologists' *Rights Without Labels* and *Inclusive Programs for Students with Disabilities* position statements would be a good starting point for policy efforts on this theme.

Restructuring Special Education

The restructuring of special education is necessary to provide greater flexibility and ease of access to special educational services for students who encounter problems in the learning process. This restructuring would hopefully reduce the costs and delays of service delivery created by the current regulations. Given that, with the exception of the small group of students who are severely physically handicapped, most other students in the special education system currently receive essentially the same educational approach to their problems. Therefore, there appears to be no pedological or psychological need for distinct special education categories. The current system, in fact, seems to be somewhat at cross purpose with itself when it wants to mainstream special education students but also label them as different, as though there were different types of human beings.

Psychology should not be lending support to the creation of categories to apply to special education students. Rather, we should help create *special* education systems which are available to all students who need additional support whether long term or short term. A diagnostic process based on this approach would be focused on the identification of specific deficits in learning and behavior. Interventions would then be targeted toward these defects. *Special* education services would thus be made available to any student whose functioning fell below some minimal expectations for academic and social emotional functioning. In this manner special education becomes a support system to the entire educational system, a safety net that is available to all students. Such a revised system would not require the labeling of people into types, and would not discriminate against the needs of some students.

Psychologists' roles in such a restructured system would be to help in the design and implementation of interventions based on individualized problem solving. The regular classroom would be the center of the action, and the intervention team would consist of the teacher, special educator, psychologist and parents. The integration of functions versus the parceling out of responsibilities to separate service delivery sites would be an integral component of the special

education support system.

Involving Parents

Involving parents in issues related to their child's behavior and performance in school is essential to the practice of psychology in schools. Parents as taxpayers, voters, and consumers of the services of the schools are major definers of what is indispensable in schools. Unfortunately, to date, parents often have had very limited if any contact with psychologists in schools. For the 80-90 % of parents who do not have children who come in contact with the special education system, it is highly unlikely that they would have any direct contact with a psychologist in the schools during their child's 12+ years of enrollment. This lack of exposure is in itself a problem. What is more problematic, however, is the lack of exposure of parents to psychologists even within the current special education delivery system, and the type of exposure that often currently occurs.

At the present time psychologists perform one component of the *comprehensive multi-disciplinary team assessment* of students referred for special education. In a manner similar to the assembly line worker, they do their part which generally involves a psychometric assessment of a child. This may or may not involve a classroom observation and teacher interview. The collection of information about the child's home and an interview with the parent is usually performed by a different member of the assembly line. Once all the workers complete their components, they bring their components to an assembly site, called an Individual Education Program (IEP) meeting. At the IEP meeting, the parents (if they attend) and each of the workers are bombarded with *all the information.* Often this is the first time the team has shared its information with each other, and this is done in a tight time frame. Out of this meeting comes a plan designed to meet the educational and mental health needs of the student. In this process, the psychologist's role is likely to be seen by the parent, at best as mysterious, and at worst as a collaborator in a *railroad job.* This team approach is a costly, time consuming procedure whose validity has never been demonstrated in terms of enhanced educational outcomes.

If psychologists are to fulfill a valuable problem solving role, they need to interact directly with parents for the purposes of assessing parental resources that may be activated for the solution of the problem, and to identify home-school, social-emotional linkages that influence a child's behavior in school. The psychologist's consultation with teachers and parents can help achieve an *individualized* design of the IEP.

By being a part of an educational system that involves parents in respectful, enabling, and empowering ways in the education of their child, psychology can gain the justified respect of parents. Parents who interact with psychologists who support their child, support their efforts, and enhance their parenting skills will inevitably value such services.

Evaluation of Services and Outcomes

Psychology has a long-standing tradition as an empirically oriented profession. Research and evaluation skills represent a relative strength of psychologists among school personnel; thus, psychologists are capable of and should play a major role in guiding and conducting research and evaluations on the services that children receive in schools. Given that the process of schooling plays a major function in the development, maintenance, and remediation of mental health problems in children, and that school-based adult-child relationships and peer relationships hold potential to resolve, exacerbate, and even cause mental health and behavioral problems, schools should be a major research site. As a mental health research profession, psychology needs to commit itself to the study of the schooling of children.

Working with the *educational system* at all

levels, a national agenda for research into the effects of schooling on children's development should be established. The professional associations which support psychology and education need to convince the various legislative bodies in the United States of the importance of supporting such research. The creation of a system of multi-state multi-site research projects which would address the research on schooling agenda will create opportunities for psychologists to fulfill essential roles in these research efforts.

The thematic directions suggested for reforms in the functioning of psychologists are likely to enhance psychology's role in school. No psychologist or psychological organization is capable of fulfilling all these roles, and exerting enough influence to create these changes. There exists within the vision presented the opportunity for all kinds and types of psychologists to participate in the process. The dialogue must involve all stakeholders and be conducted in a way that is mindful of the values and perceptions held by the educational system. The current dialogue hopefully will begin a process that results in involving all parts of psychology as potential contributors. If the guiding principle of psychology's involvement in schools is the support and enhancement of the education system, then the inevitable outcome will be that psychology will be seen as an indispensable partner in the development of an equal opportunity society.